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ABSTRACT

This paper begins by talking about six findings from a major long-term study conducted by Judith Langer, Director of the Center for the Study of English Learning and Achievement, State University at Albany, New York--the study examined English language arts programs in schools that have been working to increase student performance. The paper states that Langer focused on two kinds of schools--those identified as typically performing schools on standardized tests and those that were much higher performing schools with similar demographics. It lists and discusses her findings: (1) Teach skills and knowledge through a balance of three basic models of instruction (separated, simulated, and integrated); (2) Integrate any test preparation within the curriculum throughout the year; (3) Within curriculum and instruction, make connections across content and structure to ensure coherence; (4) Emphasize strategies for thinking and doing, or problem solving and critical thinking; (5) Encourage generative learning; and (6) Design instruction to foster collaboration and shared cognition. The paper also culls findings from other studies: (7) Recognize and respect languages other than standard written English; (8) Respond to student work with an emphasis "first" and "foremost" on the ideas, or content, and purpose of student productions; (9) Focus instruction on inquiry; and (10) Design inquiry-based thematic units. It then describes the features of good inquiry-based thematic units and provides a model unit. Participant handouts are appended. (Contains 38 references.) (NKA)

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TEN IMPORTANT FACTORS RESEARCH REVEALS ABOUT THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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TEN IMPORTANT FACTORS RESEARCH REVEALS ABOUT THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

By Larry R. Johannessen

Good morning. Given the fact that President Bush now has in place his "No Child Left Behind" policy that, according to him, is going to solve all of our educational problems and ensure that every child gets a high quality of education, I am not sure why I should even bother getting up here today to talk about what research reveals about the teaching of English because, clearly, research, and in fact, even common sense, is not something that the Bush administration or Congress bothered to consider when drafting and passing their "No Child Left Behind" policy. Indeed, as Education Secretary Roderick P. Paige said in July when he endorsed a newly released Department of Education report on teacher quality, "We now have solid evidence that smart teachers with solid content knowledge have the greatest effect on student achievement" (Mathews, 2002). If Paige is right, I should just tell you all to get smarter and take more literature courses. However, according to Linda Darling-Hammond, a Stanford University Professor of Education who leads a national effort to improve teacher education, the U.S. Department of Education report was full of statistics that were "inaccurate, misrepresented or badly out of date," and she went on to cite several recent studies that show that students score lower on standardized tests when their teachers to not have significant education training or certification.

So, I hope you won't be offended if I follow Linda Darling-Hammond's lead and talk about what research reveals about the teaching of English. In fact, given the political

climate today for educators, or just about anyone for that matter, who have ideas that are not completely in-line with those of the administration, I think I had better start by telling you what I am not going to do.

I am not going to tell you that the way to ensure that every child learns in English classes is to test them at every grade level and then test them again and again and again. I am also not going to tell you that the way to ensure that every child learns in English classes is to hold public schools and English teachers accountable for improving student test scores each year. In fact, I am not even going to tell you that we better get busy and focus on test-prep, test-prep, and more test-prep if we want to ensure that our students will do well on high-stakes tests, in-fact, at one point or another here, and I am going to tell you that this last idea is exactly what you should not do!! However, testing and assessment are not going to be far from much of what I am going to talk to you about today.

I'm going to start by talking about six findings from a major long-term study by Judith Langer who is Director of the Center for the Study of English Learning and Achievement in Albany, New York. The study examined English language arts programs in schools that have been working to increase student performance. Many of the schools in the study were identified as having poor and diverse student bodies. Langer focused on two kinds of schools. Those that were identified as typically performing schools on standardized tests and those that she describes as "beating the odds," or much higher performing schools than those with similar demographics, and she tried to identify the features that distinguished the higher performing schools from the typically performing schools. What she found has important implications for our teaching.

1. Teach skills and knowledge through a balance of three basic modes of instruction--separated, simulated, and integrated.

First, Langer found that skills and knowledge in the best performing schools were taught through a balance of multiple types of lessons. There were three distinct types of lessons: *separated, simulated,* and *integrated. Separated* instruction is what we think of as direct instruction of isolated skills and knowledge. It often takes place separately from the context of the larger activity, primarily as introduction, practice, or review. It is often associated with the teacher telling students particular rules, conventions, or facts, or when instructional material focuses on listings of vocabulary, spelling, or rules. Sometimes the instruction is used as a way to "cover" the curriculum, other times as a way to help students understand and remember underlying conventions and to learn ways in which they are applied.

In comparison, *simulated* instruction involves the actual application of concepts and rules within a targeted unit of reading, writing, or oral language. These are often exercises prepared by the teacher or found in teaching materials, where the students are expected to read or write short units of text with the primary purpose of **practicing** the skill or concept of focus. She calls it *simulated* because the tasks themselves are specifically developed for the purpose of practice.

Integrated instruction takes place when students are expected to use their skills and knowledge within the embedded context of a large and purposeful activity, such as writing a letter, report, poem, or play for a particular goal or planning, researching, writing, and editing a class newspaper. Here, the focus is on completing a project or

activity well, with primary focus on the effectiveness of the work in light of its purpose. This is the time when the skill or knowledge is put to real use as a contributing factor in the success of the work.

Langer found that in the beating the odds schools successful teachers used all three approaches, and spent approximately equal proportions of instructional time in each of the three modes. For example, in the higher performing schools, the skills and mechanics of English (grammar, usage, vocabulary) were taught within the context of literature and writing instruction, but there was often separate and overt targeted instruction and review in the form of exercises and practice.

One excellent teacher in the study selected difficult vocabulary words from readings students would be doing and showed her students how those words could be used. She often did this as a *simulated* activity, in the context of the book they were reading, or to incorporate into their writing practice. Using both *separated* and *simulated* lessons, she also helped her students learn to justify their answers, summarize information, and make connections. However, these new learnings were continually expected to be applied during *integrated* activities such as literature circles.

This teacher used literature circles as activities that call for students' use of the skills and knowledge they were learning. For example, in one instance her students were divided into literature discussion groups and each student was assigned a different role that changed each week: discussion direction, literary illuminary, vocabulary enricher, summarizer, and connector. Each student took responsibility for enriching the group from the vantage point of the assigned role. Because the groups continued throughout the

year, each student had many opportunities to practice the skills in context, and to see them modeled by the other students.

In contrast, one teacher in a typical school, responded to the call for greater emphasis on grammar by raiding the book room for a classroom set of *Warriner's English Grammar and Composition*. She said,

> Well, this is how I do it (holding up the book). I work hard and have no time to read professional journals. I teach 5 periods and mark papers. I know I have to teach grammar. My students didn't get it before, so I have to teach it. So I use this (*Warriner's*) because it lays out the lessons, and my students can also use it as a reference. (860)

Her skills lessons, through *Warriner's,* Langer says, were almost exclusively "separated activities," taught out of context, separate from the rest of her teaching.

The logical conclusion is clear here. Effective teachers keep these three instructional modes **in balance.** They use a variety of well-orchestrated instructional approaches to provide instruction and practice in the targeted skills and knowledge in ways that suffused the students' English experiences.

2. Integrate any test preparation within the curriculum throughout the year.

Langer identified two qualitatively difference approaches to test preparation used by teachers in the study. She indicates that most of the typical English teachers in the schools that she studied followed one of two strategies in preparing their students for high stakes tests. The most typical teacher did not teach test preparation at all, especially in classrooms where students where not scheduled to take a high stakes test that year. The second most common strategy was that teachers used a separated approach to test

preparation, primarily teaching test preparation skills and knowledge apart from the ongoing literacy curriculum (Langer, 2001a and 2001b). These skills include ways to select a best answer or how to best respond to a writing task from a reading item. According to Langer, neither of these approaches proved to be very effective. Langer's (2002a & 2001b) research indicates that in schools that beat the odds (that is, in schools where students tended to perform above expectations) test preparation was integrated into the ongoing class time, as part of the ongoing English language arts learning goals. In contrast, in the more typical performing schools, test prep was allocated its own space in class time, often before testing began, apart from the rest of the year's work and goals.

Langer points out that nearly all of the teachers she studied used both integrated and separated approaches to test preparation some of the time. However, the dominant patterns of use varied considerably among the beating the odds teacher and more typical teacher. More than three fourths of the more successful teachers integrated the skills and knowledge that was to be tested into the ongoing curriculum as their dominant approach to test preparation. In contrast, in schools and classrooms with typical performing students, 70% of the more typical teachers used a separated approach to test preparation. In addition, many teachers in the typical performing schools did not teach test preparation at all.

The message is clear. The goal should be to try to align the curriculum and assessment. English teachers should attempt to teach the needed literacy abilities throughout the year, as part of the regular grade-level curriculum. If English teachers focus their attention on the single goal of improving test results, and teach the needed literacy skills apart from the curriculum, the results may not be as positive as they might

think. On the other hand, if English teachers focus their instruction and curriculum on raising both test scores and student learning through an integrated curriculum, then students are more likely to perform well in both arenas.

Langer (2001a & 2001b) found that part of the success experienced in higher performing schools was related to the fact that teachers and administrators did a careful "deconstruction and analysis of the test items themselves," or task analysis, which led to a deeper understanding of what students needed to know and be able to do to achieve various levels of performance. They then did a review and revision of the curriculum and instruction to ensure that the identified skills and knowledge were incorporated into the ongoing English program the students would experience. Before the test, students practiced the "format" of the test to ensure students' familiarity with it. However, the primary focus was the infusion of the needed skills and knowledge into the curriculum. In addition, students were taught to become more reflective about their own reading and writing performance, sometimes using rubrics throughout the school year in order to help them gain insight into their performance in response to particular tasks (Langer, 2001a & 2001b).

One outstanding 7th grade teacher Langer (2001b) studied did the following: Her goal was to help her students think strategically about how to take the exam and how to distinguish what she calls "on the surface and under the surface" questions. She had her students read books such as *The House on Mango Street,* discussing their understandings and writing about it in test-like ways. She wanted to provide her students with ways to read, understand, and write in order to gain abilities that are marks of high literacy, not

merely test-passing skills. Throughout the year she focused on the skills and competencies that are needed to do well on tests **and** to do well in English.

3. Within curriculum and instruction, make connections across content and structure to ensure coherence.

Langer's analysis of instruction found that the teachers overtly pointed out connections among three different kinds of student learnings: connections among concepts and experiences within lessons; connections across lessons, classes, and even grades; and connections between in-school and out-of-school knowledge and experiences. Nearly 90% of the more successful teachers in the study tended to make all three types of connections with approximately equal focus. In comparison, the typical teaches tended to make no connections at all, and when they did, they tended to be "real-world" connections between school and home.

In the high performing schools, the teachers worked consciously to weave a web of connections. For example, one teacher planned her lessons with consideration to the ways in which they connected with each other, with test demands, and with the students' growing knowledge. When she discussed her goals for the reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* she said,

> My primary goal is to provide them with what I consider a challenging piece of literature that will give them an excellent resource for the AP exam. It fits in well with the works we have studied in that it explores the inner consciousness and makes use of a recurring image/symbol that has been the key to several other literary works… that of blindness. It allows them to explore the way a symbol can convey meaning in several literary works. Personally, I feel that Ellison's is a monumental literary work. The ramifications in terms of social psychology with the concept of invisibility applies to so many different life experiences. I try to open the students' appreciation of how this work relates to their own world and it

> introduces them to the question of identify and how the daily interactions are crucial to identify formation… (Langer, 2001a, 864)

In short, her lessons connected texts, tests, and life.

One of the more striking examples of how the more successful teachers made connections, is one teacher who talked about how he handled a major disruption in his long-range plans. I really like this example because the disruption is one that most of you will immediately recognize. Here's how this teacher handled the disruption of a class field trip, and used it to make numerous connections. This excellent teacher did what he called "curricular improvising." As he said, "If it is possible to bend the disruption so it fits in some way with my instructional plans, then I feel I have triumphed." When a grade-wide project was a field trip to a senior citizens center, his theme was "An Inter-Generational Forum: Senior Citizens and Teens Discuss What it Means to Be Liberal or Conservative." He had planned to teach his students to write character analyses, based on their class readings. He decided to use the visit to the senior citizens home as a starter; interviewing the seniors, in his words, "would force my students to interact with the seniors." But, what to do with the interviews? He asked them to write a character sketch. He explained,

> The writing follows a similar format to a persuasive essay, something my kids worked on a couple of months ago. It will also be a nice segue into the character analysis in the sense that both types of writing establish a thesis that a person has a certain character trait, then goes on to provide specific evidence to support the thesis. For the character sketch, the evidence that a person was liberal or conservative or moderate would come from the interviews. With the character analysis, which we will begin in a couple of weeks when we finish *Romeo and Juliet,* the evidence comes from things the character has said or done in the play.

This teacher made connections such as these throughout each day, week, and year, pointing them out to his students so they could recognize ways in which their skills and knowledge were productively used in a range of situations.

In contrast, in the more typical schools, even when the lessons were integrated within a unit, there was little interweaving across lessons: there were few overt connections made among the content, knowledge (literary or otherwise), and the skills that were being taught. Class lessons were often treated as separate wholes--with a particular focus introduced, practiced, and discussed, and then put aside. For example, one teacher said that in his year-long plans, he moved students from more subjective to more objective writing tasks. However, the researchers saw no indication he shared this distinction with his students, or helped them make other connections among the kinds of writing he assigned.

One less successful teacher asked questions that encouraged her students to make connections, but because discussions were carefully controlled, the connections the students would make were predetermined and unsophisticated. After reading a chapter of *Anpao: An American Indian Odyssey,* the teacher opened her discussion in the following manner:

> T: In the Judeo-Christian tradition, do we have animals that converse with God?
> S1: No.
> T: Only one, and which one is that?
> S2: The snake.
> T: The snake. Representative of--?
> (Chorus of S): Satan.
> T: Right. Satan. In this case the animals are benevolent. They are not evil. How is humanity according to this legend?

Rather than encouraging her students to make their own connections, or showing them how, this teacher guided them to guess the connection she has made. Following this very short discussion/recitation, the teacher had the students sequence 24 events that she had taken from the first chapters of the text. This sequencing activity was disconnected from the discussion that had preceded it and was followed by another disconnected activity the next day, when she planned to have them act out a scene from the text.

4. Emphasize strategies for thinking and doing, or problem-solving and critical thinking.

Langer also found considerable differences in the ways teachers went about teaching students strategies to engage in reading and writing activities and to reflect on and monitor their performance. In some classrooms, students were overtly taught strategies for thinking and doing; in other words, the focus was on new content or skills, without overtly teaching the overarching strategies for planning, organizing, completing, or reflecting on the content or activity. All of the more successful teachers overtly taught their students strategies for organizing their thoughts and completing tasks, whereas only 17% of the more typical teachers did so. The other 83% of the more typical teachers left such strategies implicit.

Successful teachers often segmented new or difficult tasks, providing their students with guides for ways to accomplish them. However, the help they offered was not merely procedural; rather it was designed so that the students would understand how to do well. Sometimes the teachers provided models or lists, and sometimes evaluation rubrics. Strategies for how to do the task as well as how to think about the task were

discussed and modeled, and reminder sheets were developed for student use. These strategies provided the students with ways to work through the tasks themselves, helping them to understand and meet the task demands. For instance, one teacher taught her students strategies to use to reflect on their progress as they moved through an activity. After a research activity, the students were to rate themselves on their research and writing using rubrics they had developed:

1. Where do you think you fall for the research [grade yourself]? Did you spend the time trying to find the information? Did you keep going until you had learned enough to write your report?
2. Whether this is a short and informal or longer and more formal piece, you should spend time thinking about the writing. Did you plan what you were going to say? Did you think about it? Did you review it and revise it before putting it in the back?
3. Did you edit? Did you check the spelling and punctuation?

Most of these teachers shared and discussed with students rubrics for evaluating performance; they also incorporated them into their ongoing instructional activities as a way to help their students develop an understanding of the components that contribute to a higher score (more complete, more elaborated, more highly organized response). Use of the rubrics also helped students develop reflection and repair strategies relevant to their reading, writing, and oral presentation activities.

For example, when another teacher's students were learning to do character analyses and to understand differing perspectives, she asked them to begin by developing a critical thinking question and then to choose two characters from the book (or books) they had read, in order to compare the characters' viewpoints on that question. The critical thinking questions needed to be ones that anyone could discuss even if they had not read the book (e.g., one student asked, "Why are people so cruel when it comes to

revenge?" [869]). Before they met in groups, she provided this outline: (a) share your critical thinking question with your group; (b) tell your group partners why you chose that particular question and what situation in the book made you think about it; and (c) tell which two characters you have chosen to discuss that question in a mini-play. The students engaged in deep and substantive discussion about their classmates' questions, because the teacher's strategy list had helped them gain clarity on the goals and process of the task. Discussions were followed, the next day, by a prewriting activity in preparation for writing a description of the characters they chose. The teacher instructed them on how to develop a T-chart on which one character's name is placed at the top on one column of the T and the other character at the other side. She told them to list characteristics: what their characters were like, experiences they had, opinions, etc. She provided them with strategies to identify characteristics and then ways to compare them across the two characters. This is only one part of a highly complex activity. The students were provided with supportive strategies along the way, gaining insight not merely into the characters themselves, but into ways they could understand characters and differing perspectives when reading and writing on their own.

Teachers in the more typical schools focused instruction on the content or the skill, but not necessarily on providing students with procedural or metacognitive strategies. For example, in the sequencing activity in the 10th grade teacher's class I mentioned earlier, two of the three small groups were having difficulty putting the 24 events in sequence. Rather than eliciting any strategies that might be useful, the teacher simply told them. "OK. Divide your slips into thirds. Ok? This is research. Start with the beginning, the middle, and the end and put the strips into three different piles. Get

this done and you'll have a method" (Langer 2001a, 869). But her guidance did not help the students understand the concept of sequencing any better, nor was it meant to create temporal order from story. Only one group of students seemed to understand what she meant and completed the task. So although the teacher wanted her students to practice the skill of sequencing, she provided them with little guidance for doing so, either with her help or on their own.

5. Encourage generative learning.

When Langer (2001a & 2001b) examined how the teachers conceived of successful learning, two quite different views emerged. For all of the more typical teachers learning was seen as successful and complete once students exhibited an **initial** understanding of the targeted skill or concept. For all of the successful teachers, such immediate understandings were just the beginning of the learning process, which continued with related activities to move students toward deeper understandings and generatively of ideas.

For example, after one successful teacher's class had read, analyzed, discussed, and written about *The Scarlet Letter,* they did research into the colonial era, the Puritans and their living conditions, and the social structures of the times. After discussing what they had learned from their research, they read pieces that focus on related themes such as scapegoating, sin, temptation, and Puritanism. "A Respectable Woman" by Kate Chopin, "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson, and "For Each Ecstatic Moment" and "Time's Lesson" by Emily Dickinson were among the works they read. The students discussed the works in literary circles, making comparisons and contrasts across them, including

theme, style, language, characterization, authorial and social biases, and the relevance of differing interpretations across time and culture. They moved from comprehending and interpreting *The Scarlet Letter* to using it as a way into other works and then using other works to gain enriched understanding not merely of *The Scarlet Letter,* but of relations among literature, literacy, and life (Langer, 2001b).

In contrast, in the classrooms of the more typical teachers, when the particular learning goals within a lesson or unit are reached, the students are moved on to another (often disconnected) lesson. The learning activity and the thinking about it seemed to stop with the responses sought or the assigned task completed. The learning is more a superficial recall of names, definitions, and facts than a deeper and more highly conceptualized learning.

For example, when one teacher had his students read *To Kill a Mockingbird,* he asked questions about the content and vocabulary. He called on students to provide answers and when they did, he either added additional comments to their responses or moved on to the next question. Neither the text nor the students' responses were used during the discussion to generate historical, social, or other connections and elaborations.

Thus, more successful teachers constantly encouraged students to go beyond the basic learning experiences in challenging and enriching ways. In contrast, students in classes taught by the more typical teachers had few opportunities for more creative and critical experiences.

6. Design instruction to foster collaboration and shared cognition.

According to Langer (2001a & 2001b), the final aspect of instructional approaches that differentiated among the teachers had to do with the extent to which the design of instruction provided students with a variety of opportunities to learn through substantive interaction with one another as well as with the teacher. The more successful teachers helped students engage in thoughtful dialogue or *shared cognition*. Teachers expected their students not merely to work together, but to sharpen their understandings with, against, and from each other. In comparison, teachers in the more typical classes focused on individual thinking. Even when their students worked together, the thinking was parallel as opposed to dialogic.

Langer points out that students in the more successful classes not only worked together in physical proximity, but they gained skill in sharing ideas, reacting to each other, testing out ideas and arguments, and contributing to the intellectual tenor of the class. They engaged in the kind of teamwork that is now so highly prized in business and industry, although sometimes suspect in school settings where solitary work is till too often prized.

One successful teacher in a middle school used both whole class and small group activities; they wove into one another and together supported students' developing thinking. For example, in response to reading assignments, she asked her students to bring three thought-provoking questions to class to stimulate discussion. Students met in groups to discuss these questions and come up with one or two "big" questions for the entire class to discuss. The teacher moved from group to group, modeling questions and comments, and provoking deeper discussion and analysis. After the whole class discussion, the teacher listed on the board items on which the students had agreed as well

as issues that still needed to be resolved. In both small groups and whole class discussions, the students needed to interact in thoughtful ways; the social activity was critical to moving their understandings forward and doing well. These discussions were interspersed with assignments the students were to complete in groups. For example, while reading *The Giver,* she gave the following assignment:

> Group Task 1--Government [this is one of four]
> Form a group of no less than three and no more than five students to complete this task. Review the chapters we have read. Design a chart that illustrates how the government for this community functions. Include all information you can find about who makes the decisions and who has power in the community. Include the roles of individuals in this structure.

This task required the students not merely to locate information, but to discuss and refine what they meant by government and how it functions in the story, as well as the implicit roles the various characters serve.

In classes taught by the less successful teachers, group work often took place, but the students did not "chew ideas" together or challenge each other intellectually. They cooperated in completing the task but did not work conceptualizations through (Langer 2001a). For example, when one teacher had his class work together doing study guides, they guides in front of them, moving from item to item down the page. As one student called out the answer, the others wrote it onto their worksheets and together they moved on to the next question.

In another less successful class, for example, after reading *Animal Farm,* each group was to create an Animal Farm Newspaper. However, each group member selected a segment (e.g., obituary, horoscope, cartoon, editorial) and completed it as homework; then the pieces were assembled into a four-page newspaper. Because of the way this

activity is set up, the students missed opportunities to work through ideas together for each of the components that was incorporated into the final product.

There is an essential difference here is the way learning activity is carried on in the more successful teachers and more typical teachers classrooms, with the more successful teachers treating students as members of dynamic learning communities that rely on social and cognitive interactions to support and extend learning. They design activities that encourage students to chew ideas together and challenge each other. In contrast, the more typical teachers tend to treat each learner as an individual, with the assumption that interaction will either diminish the thinking or disrupt the discipline.

7. Recognize and respect languages other than standard written English.

Research from a number of studies shows that students achieve more when schools recognize and respect languages other than "standard written English." One problem, according to many experts, is that Americans tend to look down on certain language variations, such African-American Vernacular English or Appalachian English, and approaches that involve analysis of language variation and accompanying teaching practicing, are met with controversy. In fact, Carolyn Adger, director of the Center for Applied Linguistics' Language and Society Division, says, "I get hate mail because of the things that I've written that are on our Web site." She notes that, "We have had this belief in our society that standard English is the only English that counts. ... The hard view is that the other dialects should be stamped out."

In fact, Carol D. Lee, Associate Professor of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University, who is a former high school English teacher and founder of two

schools in Chicago, says, "The only case where language is wrong is where [it] is inappropriate to the context," since the audience might miss the message. She adds, "Most English teachers don't have this knowledge base about language. Most district leaders don't, and certainly, most politicians don't. But linguists are clear on this."

Linguists know that research supports this view of language. As Rebecca Wheeler, an Assistant Professor of English at Christopher Newport University in Virginia notes, most of the preservice teachers who take her course come in thinking "that anyone who speaks a variety other than standard English is ignorant, lazy [and] lacking in intelligence." However, after discussing research about dialects in schools and communities, and after identifying grammatical patterns in various languages, students realize that each is a rule-governed system. "As they discover these language patterns, the respect for the speakers goes up," Wheeler says.

Research from numerous studies has found that:

- Students must be comfortable with themselves as learners before they can be successful academically.
- Minority students often lose their perceptions of personal competence not long after they begin formal schooling.
- Mastering the standard language may be easier if differences between that language and student languages are contrasted, not corrected or ignored.
- When contrastive analysis approaches are used as a way to improve writing skills, student writing contains less non-standard language compared to students taught using traditional methods.

What exactly is a contrastive analysis approach? Well, it is not about teaching non-standard English. Rebecca Wheeler says that "It's about using the language patterns that the children bring with them as a springboard in the enterprise of teaching standard English." Walt Wolfram, a professor at North Carolina State University and director of

the North Carolina Language and Life Project, says "We're not trying to sabotage the goals of education. We're trying to be faithful to the objectives to include multicultural education and language."

Let me briefly describe three highly successful programs based on these research findings. The first and largest is the Los Angeles Unified School District. This program started eleven years ago when the district realized that many teachers weren't conscious of their students' home languages and as a result devalue them, they "convey a message that negatively impacts their classroom performance and the result is lowered aspirations and achievement levels," according to Noma LeMoine, director of the language and literacy program for the district. Based on this belief, the district developed the Academic English Mastery Program to address the needs of students who speak African-American Vernacular English, Mexican-American "Chicano" English, "Hawaiian Pidgin" English, and Native American English.

The district selects schools with high percentages of these students for the K-12 program, which infuses information on the origin and historical development of standard and non-standard languages into the curriculum. Students are taught contrastive analysis, and daily instruction includes 30 to 45 minutes of mainstream English language development. Visuals are used to explain concepts, and students create personal thesauruses of conceptually coded words to help in vocabulary-building.

Carol Lee is responsible for developing a very interesting program at Fenger Academy High School in Chicago. Her program is a school-wide program that involves a cultural modeling framework. The idea is that the curriculum focuses on modeling figurative literary concepts based on African-American English norms. Lee recognized

that a form of ritual insult used in the African-American community frequently generates literary devices. As she says, "These students in their community language practices already have a knowledge of how to tackle these literary problems. It's just not conscious." The senior year curriculum, for example, starts off with a discussion of rap lyrics from music and films, then moves into books by Toni Morrison and other African-American writers. Students tackle short stories by Amy Tan next, and finally they progress to works by writers such as William Faulkner, which are now more accessible to them.

Teachers had to get used to the idea of supporting informal classroom conversations during literary debates, where the students engage in multi-party overlapping talk and tend to be loud and dramatic, says Lee. However, through discussion of taped classes, the teachers honed their teaching techniques and agreed that the curriculum gave students a sense of competence as problem-solvers.

One elementary teacher has her students make charts of written/formal language vs. spoken/informal language and explains that neither is "right" or "wrong," as long as the language fits the situation. Not only did her students do better on standardized tests this year, but they saw writing in a new, positive way. In addition, the students took this respect for differences to greater heights. A child who was formerly teased because of a stutter is now much more accepted by classmates. And he has "improved so much in reading and writing that it's just amazing," says his teacher.

This elementary teacher said something else that I think sums up what these examples illustrate and what the research indicates about this: "What we're doing now

[for underachieving students] isn't working. How much is it going to hurt to try something different?" Indeed, how much will it hurt?

8. Respond to student work with an emphasis <u>first</u> and <u>foremost</u> on the ideas, or content, and purpose of student productions.

It is time to change direction for awhile. I want you to give some thought to four questions.

- First, what are the **primary reasons** that teachers make comments on student work?
- And, how much **time** do you spend making comments related to each of these two areas?
- And, thinking about the nature of the comments that you make on students' written work, what **percentage** of your comments are related to the ideas, content, and the purpose of student written work?
- and what **percentage** is related to the grammar, spelling, punctuation, and mechanics or surface features of student written work?

Now, let's work on answering some of these questions. In a review of research on commenting on student work, George Hillocks notes that teachers comment on student work for two primary reasons: to justify a particular grade assigned and to advise students on ways to improve their work. He goes on to say that it is only the second function that has real educational value (Hillocks, 1982a, 80). As Hillocks suggests in his review of research, we ought to be spending the bulk of our time advising students on ways to improve their writing and other productions. A good ratio to keep in mind as a

guidepost is 2 to 1; that is, for every one comment you make to justify a grade, you should have **at least two if not more** comments that are specifically related to helping students to improve their work.

But, now what about the nature of those comments related to improving student work. Here, I think most of us could probably use a little help. Hillocks (1982a, 1986) and other researchers (e.g., Dossin, 1992) have examined the nature of the comments teachers make on student productions in a variety of different contexts, and they have found some interesting results. These researchers have found that too often the bulk of teachers' comments are on the surface features of a piece of work such as the grammar, spelling, or mechanics when that has not been the primary focus of the instruction that preceded the assignment. This is confusing to students and sends the message that was really important is not what they had to say but rather the surface features of their work. One negative result of this is that as some studies have shown (Hillocks, 1982a & 1986), students actually start writing less instead of more and they start writing simpler instead of more complex sentences because they know that they will be less likely to make a mistake and be criticized.

So, how should we comment on student work? According to the research, most of our comments should **emphasize <u>first</u> and <u>foremost</u> the ideas, or content, and purpose of student productions** over the grammar, spelling, and mechanics.

But wait, there is more. I'd like to think for a moment about how **long** your comments are? Let me be more specific: **What is the average number of words you write for a typical comment on student productions? How many words and how many sentences do you write?**

Okay, let's hear some responses? About how many words do you typically write? How many sentences? How about you? And, you?

Here is what the research tells us about this issue. When compared to short comments and no comments, long comments were considerably less effective than short comments on student work. Hillocks (1982a & 1986) and others suggest that based on the research, you should try to keep your comments brief--now get ready--**10-25 words or about two or three sentences**. And, if you limit your comments to the focus of instruction, they will have the most impact at effecting change.

The research shows one additional extremely important thing as well. When you compare the impact of comments with the use of instructional activities to improve writing, like those examples of the activities in successful teachers classrooms in the CELA research I discussed earlier and an example I am going to show you in the next part of this presentation, then there is no question about how we should be spending our time. As Hillocks (1982a) puts it, the research suggests that

> ... instructional activities which preceded writing are more powerful in effecting change than the assignment alone. It suggests that activities are more important to change than lengthy comments by the teacher. It suggests that without activities, long comments have a depressive effect.... Without [instructional] activities the detailed suggestions of the longer comments may simply be interpreted as criticisms [by students]. (83)

So, what does this mean in terms of what we should do? As Hillocks (1982a) suggests, this all comes down to a problem "of making decisions about time." He indicates that "planning activities to engage students and lead to better writing should receive priority." In fact, he says that "If we have to choose between time for planning and time for commenting, we ought to go for the planning time" (Hillocks, 1982a, 83).

So, this is what we can take away from the results of research on commenting on student productions:

- The bulk of your comments should be to advise students on ways to improve rather than to justify a particular grade assigned.
- Most of your comments should emphasize first and foremost the ideas, or content, and purpose of student productions over the grammar, spelling, and mechanics.
- Keep your comments brief--10 to 25 words (if possible)--about two to three sentences.
- Try to limit your comments or the bulk of your comments to the focus of your instruction to bring about significant change.
- Choose time spent planning instructional activities over time spent commenting on student productions as the most effective way to effect change.

9. Focus instruction on inquiry.

There is a growing body of research that points to problem-solving or inquiry as an important approach to helping students develop the critical thinking and problem-solving skills they will need to be productive citizens in this challenging century.

What is inquiry teaching? Effective inquiry instruction has the following key features: The teacher must design instruction that presents a puzzling event, question, or problem. The students

- formulate hypotheses to explain the event or solve the problem
- collect data to test the hypotheses (or the teacher provides a means for students to collect data that they can bring to bear in attacking the problem)
- draw conclusions
- reflect on the original problem and the thinking processes needed to solve it.

In addition, the instruction needs to engage students in exploring problems that are intrinsically interesting to them, that have no quick or easy solutions but are open to a variety of solutions or interpretations. Also, inquiry instruction usually makes use of small group collaboration to promote high levels of student-to-student interaction. This is important because it helps students gain a greater understanding of other perspectives. As students' ideas or hypotheses are challenged by others, they revise and refine their thinking. This element also provides scaffolding for students while they are learning new strategies so that ultimately they internalize procedures and are able to tackle new tasks effectively on their own.

Look in your handout at the sheet entitled, "Does She Deserve Honor?" I will take you through one activity designed to teach students the thinking strategies and rhetorical skills involved in writing argument.

Could I ask someone to read the case aloud while the rest of us follow along silently? (READ CASE!)

After passing out the case problem, I read it aloud to students. Then, I put students in small groups and ask them to discuss the case and answer the questions posed at the end. I ask the groups to attempt to reach a consensus on whether Jennifer Dinesen should be admitted to the National Honor Society. After fifteen or twenty minutes--or longer if needed--I re-form the class for discussion. I ask students to present their responses to the questions and their decision and discuss differences. The discussion begins with one group presenting their responses and decision and listening to responses and decisions from the rest of the class. At this point, the class discussion usually becomes quite lively as students argue their positions and refute others. This discussion

requires students to consider why, for example, an unwed mother would or would not "lead" others in the wrong direction.

In the small group and whole class discussion students are introduced to and are practicing the skills and thinking strategies involved in argumentation. They must come up with arguments, counterarguments, and evidence from the case to justify their decisions. For example, in attempting to explain why an unwed mother has not lost her "character," students will have to refute the opposing viewpoint than an unwed mother is not of strong character. Here is an example of an exchange that took place in one eleventh grade class after students had discussed the questions in small groups (PUT UP OVERHEAD):

> **Student #1:** We thought Jennifer exhibited strong leadership because after she had her baby she devoted all of her out of school time to her most important responsibility--"caring for her baby daughter." She is showing others that she is taking responsibility for her actions.
>
> **Student #2:** We thought exactly the opposite. She lives at home with her parents. Her parents are supporting her and "they take care of the baby" when she is at school. If she was really a leader, she would get a job and support herself and her baby instead of letting her parents support them.
>
> **Student #1:** You're wrong. When most high school girls get pregnant, they usually hide it so that nobody knows. Jennifer is just the opposite. She is taking a lot of stuff from other kids in school. It shows a lot of "courage" to stay in school,

keep her daughter, and face all the stuff from other kids. She is showing other kids that you can make a mistake and live with that mistake.

Students #3: You just said it: "Mistake"! By getting pregnant she made a mistake that shows she lacks leadership. A true leader would not go crying to everyone about how "deeply hurt" she is by the faculty selection committee's decision because she has "worked so hard for four years."

This exchange continued in a similar manner for several minutes. This brief example illustrates how the activity engages students in practicing the skills and thinking strategies involved in argumentation. It is important to note that there is no one right or wrong answer for this case study problem. This inevitably leads to lively small group and whole class discussions in which students are actively debating, practicing the thinking skills involved in argumentation.

Here are some questions you might use as a guide in leading the class discussion or in helping small groups (PUT UP OVERHEAD):

*How would you define "good character"?

*What qualities of "character" does Jennifer exhibit, if any? How does she exhibit them?

*What qualities does she lack? How does she lack them?

*Does "good character" have anything to do with Jennifer's situation? Why or why not?

*Has Jennifer lost her "character"? Explain.

*What does "leadership" mean?

*What qualities of "leadership" does Jennifer exhibit, if any? How does she exhibit them?

*What qualities does she lack? How does she lack them?

*Will Jennifer "lead" others in the wrong direction? Why or why not?

*Should Jennifer be admitted to the National Honor Society? Why or why not?

*What arguments and evidence will the opposing view point to? How might you refute them?

Up to this point, students have formulated hypotheses, tested their hypotheses utilizing the data provided, and drawn some tentative conclusions. The next step takes them through the inquiry cycle described above.

Once all of the students have had a chance to express their views, it is important to have them reflect on the problem presented in the case and the thinking processes involved in solving it. I ask students to discuss the arguments and counterarguments that seemed particularly strong and what made them strong, as well as those that were weak and why. I also ask them to discuss how weak arguments and counterarguments could be improved.

There is rarely complete agreement as to what should be done in Jennifer's case. This situation provides a natural follow-up writing situation. I have students write a composition explaining why Jennifer should or should not be admitted to the National Honor Society. They should include evidence from the case to support their arguments and counterarguments and evidence to refute the opposing viewpoint. This follow-up

writing situation gives students practice using the skills and strategies they have rehearsed in their small group and whole class discussions. What is most important at this point is that I have introduced students to and given them some practice with the thinking strategies involved in argument: generating and supporting a claim, challenging others' viewpoints, clarifying reasoning, answering objections from their audience, providing and explaining evidence, and criticizing faulty logic. In teaching students how to write an argument and persuade others, I have found that it is most effective first to include an activity such as this one as part of a sequence of similar activities so the students can practice and internalize the procedures and strategies involved in effective argument They can then use the procedures and strategies independently when they have to create an argument on their own.

This same activity could also be used to help prepare students for Nathanial Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. It helps students to overcome their initial difficulty with the seemingly alien seventeenth century colonial Puritan society of Boston, Massachusetts. In addition, it prepares students for some of the issues and themes in the novel, such as social responsibility, Puritanism, and the other viewpoints that Hawthorne brings into conflict with Puritanism. What is particularly gratifying about doing this activity prior to their reading the novel is that as students read it, they are often quick to point to the case when they discuss their interpretations. I am most pleased when a student suddenly says, "This is just like that case we read about Jennifer Dinesen."

Research indicates that having students work with problem-based activities like this one has a powerful effect on their reading and writing. In a major review of research

on teaching writing, Hillocks (1986) found that the effect of inquiry on student writing was twice as powerful as any other focus of instruction.

10. Design inquiry-based thematic units.

The final thing I would like to discuss today really builds on the idea of inquiry teaching, but it adds a new dimension. Researchers who have examined intructional units have found that one of the most effective ways to help students learn new skills and thinking strategies, such as how to interpret literature, is through inquiry-based thematic units. Obviously, I won't be able to show you a whole unit here today, but what I can do is define what inquiry-based thematic units are, discuss some of the benefits of this type of unit, discuss the key features, and briefly take you through a unit to give you a sense of what one is like.

What is an inquiry-based thematic unit?

Smagorinsky and Gevinson (1989) define this type of unit in the following way: it "brings together sequences of literary works with common properties and problems, arranged so that students become increasingly familiar with and adept at dealing with those properties and problems (p. 63).

Elizabeth Kenney (1999), an English teacher at Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, says that an inquiry-based thematic unit is a tightly sequenced investigation of a concept, beginning in the students' home territory, and taking them into the unknown, unified by the recursive application of key questions. In other words, a theme, or concept, that might be explored or examined in a unit is something like

maturity, the outcast, friendship, or *romantic love.* She explains that the questions are recursive in that you ask the same questions over and over again with each text students read and/or with each problem they tackle; the result is a spiraling of the students' knowledge and understanding of the concept as they become more and more adept at dealing with the concept as they tackle increasingly more difficult problems and literature.

David Anderson (Joyce and Anderson, 1999), English Chair at Hinsdale South High School, in Darien, Illinois, uses the term conceptual unit. He maintains that this type of unit is designed to organize students' learning around a particular emphasis. Literature and related artistic texts provide the stimulus for student inquiry into the unit topic. He says that it is not simply a collection of texts that share a topic, which is what most textbook anthology's call thematic units. It involves students in a conversation that deepens as they progress through the texts, activities, and discussions. A conceptual unit must focus on a set of key concepts that students engage with over time. The extended consideration is designed to

- help students come to a better personal understanding of the topic and their related experiences;
- provide students with tools that will enable them to read and produce new texts;
- furnish students with a social context through which they can develop this new knowledge to the best of their potential.

What Are the Features of Good Inquiry-based Thematic Units?

A good inquiry-based thematic unit contains the following key features:

An Effective Theme that is relevant, engaging, intellectually rich, appropriate to the curriculum, and is a manageable scope;

A strong rationale providing the intellectual basis for the unit and explaining why the unit is worth studying;

Key questions governing the parameters of the exploration;

An Introductory activity that "hooks" the students, "problematizes" the theme or concept and raises key questions;

A Sequence of Activities and Materials providing continuous growth in sophistication and recursive unity;

A Gateway Activity providing a link to prior units and/or prior learning that involves working with relevant processes and interacting with peers;

And Assessment and Evaluation involving application of consolidated ideas and both students and teacher evaluate the effectiveness of the unit.

Briefly, here is a Model Unit!

Smagorinsky (2002) and Smagorinsky and Gevinson (1989) describe one possible unit that would focus on the "coming-of-age" theme for tenth grade students. Obviously, this is an important theme for students to study as it is a common theme in a great deal of literature, so it is important for students to learn how this literature works and to develop the skills and strategies that will enable them to read and interpret it on their own. Their rationale for this unit, draws on literary theory, including the idea of archetypes, reading

comprehension theory, adolescent development, including Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, and Vygotsky's theory of social literacy. Some of the key questions for the unit are: What is the definition of maturity? What examples of immature behavior do the protagonists exhibit before their coming-of-age experiences? What examples of mature behavior do they exhibit after their coming-of-age experiences? What is the key incident that causes the protagonist to change? What are the similarities among the experiences of the characters in the various stories? How truly do these experiences reflect those of real people? In what ways does the reader have empathy for the protagonist? How does the empathy affect the reader's comprehension?

The introductory activity for the unit is a two step activity in which students write about a personal experience they've had involving a coming-of-age experience, identifying immature behavior at the beginning, a key incident that caused change, and mature behavior following the incident. After students write, they meet in small groups to read, discuss, and write a definition of maturity. This is followed by a class discussion of student definitions, focusing on the common characteristics of the experiences. At the conclusion of the discussion, the teacher collects the student definitions.

The students engage in a series of preliminary lessons in which the teacher guides student inquiry in whole-class discussions, utilizing a modified set of key unit questions. Students read, discuss and analyze a series of short stories, including Alice Monroe's "Red Dress," Nicolai Chukovski's "The Bridge," and Doris Lessing's "A Sunrise on the Veldt." Students also interview a parent or other adult about their key coming-of-age experience, again utilizing a modified set of key unit questions, and write-up the interview including reflection on that experience. Next, as students move toward

independence, small groups of students examine a new story, such as Doris Lessing's "Through the Tunnel." Next, the class undertakes the study of the major work in the unit, John Knowles' novel *A Separate Peace.* Prior to starting the novel, students experience a gateway activity that consists of a series of six different scenarios that might involve a key coming-of-age experience. Students discuss the scenarios in small groups and determine if it is a key coming-of-age experience. They need to apply the criteria of immature behavior prior to the experience and mature behavior after the experience in order to determine which scenarios do and which do not reflect a true coming-of-age experience.

As a final activity, to assess how well students have learned the unit concept, students are given a new short story, such as Richard Wright's "Almos' a Man," to read and write an analysis on their own. A second possible assessment activity involves returning the definitions of the coming-of-age experience that students wrote in the first activity and asking them to revise/write a definition of the coming-of-age experience utilizing the literature studied in the unit.

This kind of unit offers numerous advantages over traditional approaches. Probst (1994) says, I believe that this approach "respects the text and the reader" and makes our classrooms places that make our students, as Probst points out, "readers and writers, independent and self-reliant thinkers who employ language and literature to enrich their lives" (1994, 44).

Conclusion:

I started by telling you that I was probably not going to be the darling of the Bush administration and Secretary Rod Paige because I was not going to get up here and tell you to get smarter and learn more about literature to be a better teacher. I think it is fair to say that I have lived up to that promise. However, what I have tried to do is to discuss ten important factors that research tells us can have a significant impact on student learning in English. I think you will find as you attend the sessions here today, that many of the speakers will be providing you with concrete examples for applying some of the research I have discussed here today. I thank you for your attention and I hope you enjoy the rest of the conference.

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APPENDIX

Participant Handouts

TEN IMPORTANT FACTORS RESEARCH REVEALS ABOUT THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

1. Teach skills and knowledge through a balance of three basic modes of instruction--separated, simulated, and integrated.

2. Integrate any test preparation within the curriculum throughout the year.

3. Within curriculum and instruction, make connections across content and structure to ensure coherence.

4. Emphasize strategies for thinking and doing, or problem-solving and critical thinking.

5. Encourage generative learning.

6. Design instruction to foster collaboration and shared cognition.

7. Recognize and respect languages other than standard written English.

8. Respond to student work with an emphasis first and foremost on the ideas, or content, and purpose of student productions.

9. Focus instruction on inquiry.

10. Design inquiry-based thematic units.

DOES SHE DESERVE HONOR?

Jennifer Dinesen, a high school senior, was denied induction to the National Honor Society (NHS) because she is an unmarried mother. A faculty selection committee at Streamridge High School invited Jennifer to join the school's National Honor Society but then revoked the offer when it discovered that the 18 year old had a daughter. Students are selected for the National Honor Society based on four criteria: character, leadership, service, and scholastic achievement. Dinesen met the academic requirements, but the committee felt that because she is an unwed mother her character is in question and she is not a good role model (leader) for other students.

The rules of the National Honor Society state that "pregnancy cannot be the basis for automatic rejection," but each school is allowed to set its own standards as long as they are applied consistently. The superintendent explained that Jennifer Dinesen is not the first student at Streamridge to be denied membership in the school's honor society because of sexual activity.

As a senior, Jennifer has a 3.8 grade point average. She has been a member of the Spanish Club since freshman year and served as secretary of the club her sophomore year. She was a starting player on the junior varsity girls' basketball team her freshman and sophomore years. During her junior year, she was in charge of decorations for the school's homecoming dance, and she also worked as a volunteer four hours a week at a local day care center for disabled children. All of her out-of-school time during her senior year has been spent caring for her baby daughter. Jennifer lives with her parents, and when she is at school, they take care of the baby. She has not received any discipline referrals for four years.

Jennifer says, "I'm deeply hurt by the school's decision because I have worked so hard for four years."

Questions

What is at issue are two qualities the honor society demands: leadership and character. As an unwed mother, has Jennifer lost her character? Will she lead others in the wrong direction? Do you agree with the faculty committee's decision not to induct Jennifer Dinesen into the National Honor Society? Why or why not?

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